The Cultural Politics of Nonhuman Things

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This article confronts Richard Rorty’s idea of cultural politics with Bruno Latour’s argument for extending democracy to nonhuman things. Why does Latour make this argument? How many of his assumptions might Rorty share? Quite a few, it turns out. Additionally, ethical integration with nonhumans promises to advance the cosmopolitan politics we require for an effective response to ecological crisis.

We have no duties to anything nonhuman.
Richard Rorty

Half our politics is constructed in science and technology. The other half of nature is constructed in societies. Let us patch the two back together and the political task can begin again.
Bruno Latour

This essay confronts Richard Rorty’s idea of cultural politics with Bruno Latour’s argument on extending democracy to nonhuman things. Why does Latour make this argument? How many of his assumptions might Rorty share? (Quite a few, we’ll see) But these nonhumans are not subjects; with them (also without them) there can be no solidarity. Can we share our democracy with them? Or is Rorty’s pragmatism finally too humanist and social constructionist to allow that we might have democracy with nonhuman things?

1. The Plausibility of Polytheism

I think it is more in the way of a striking metaphor than a late conversion that Richard Rorty spoke encouragingly in his last work about a new polytheism. One can understand that he should be unhappy with monotheism, which at least in its Christian version supported the metaphysics of presence as soon as they came together in the Book of John. But how serious is the polytheism?

Max Weber also spoke of a new polytheism, that being his dramatic term for the shattered unity of action and experience in art, science, morality, and politics, as modern rationalization overcomes tradition. “The numerous gods of yore, divested of their magic and hence assuming the shape of impersonal forces, arise from their graves, strive for power over our lives, and resume their eternal struggle among
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themselves.”¹ These new gods are impersonal forces – the state, growth, planning, technology, human rights, democracy, security. The theism of this polytheism is in the strength of commitment these new gods command, and the poly is not merely a pluralism of different values. It is pluralism plus the presumption of conflict. In other words, “God is dead.” There is no assured commensurability; in fact, incommensurability reigns among people’s ultimate values. Weber sets himself against the default assumption of Western thought, which is that humanity’s highest values are compatible and even imply each other. He rejects the liberal option, which is to keep ultimate questions (Rawls’ “comprehensive doctrines”) out of the public sphere. For Weber, it is just not possible to do. Incommensurable values are unavoidable and so is their conflict, which he calls a “fundamental fact of all history,” and “the tragedy in which all action is ensnared, political action above all.”²

Rorty explains his polytheism in reply to the question, What’s the big deal about a “linguistic turn” in philosophy? Rorty has been associated with this linguistic turn ever since he edited a book with that title in the heyday of the movement.³ Later, he refers to this turn to explain the difference between the old pragmatism of James and Dewey, and his new version.⁴ Replying to the question, he says, “The linguistic turn ... seems to me a big deal because it suggests a kind of polytheism. It suggests that there are lots of ways for describing things; and that we choose among them on the basis of utility, and not on the basis of correspondence to the true nature of experience.... If the notion of multiple descriptions chosen on the basis of utility took hold it would change the tone of cultural life.”⁵ It is indeed tone that noticeably distinguishes this polytheism from that of Weber. Weber is sober, realistic, tragic. Rorty is ebullient, as if enlarged or freer, the air better, sunshine again. Weber is one reading of Nietzsche, Rorty another.

Odo Marquard is another neopolytheist, and closer to Rorty than Weber in tone. The separation of powers that Weber dramatizes as the new polytheism contains seeds of chaos that promise new opportunities for individual freedom.⁶ Marquard seems to think of the new gods as Weber did, as the powers of late-capitalist Western society. As he so often does, Rorty transposes the issue into a linguistic key. The poly of his theism is the multiplicity of true (assertable) descriptions of anything. The theism, the divinity, is the utility of this multiplicity, the choice and freedom that it offers, allowing us to shape our actions to a higher degree that we otherwise could. Utility is the Jupiter and Zeus of Rorty’s polytheism, but he makes an important qualification: “It isn’t as though you can appeal to utility as a criterion. Utility is just a blanket label for whatever rationale you have for doing what you’re currently doing.”⁷ This admission makes Rorty’s “utilitarianism” rather ironic. There is no comprehensive, universal, or even aggregate utility; only people, individual and concerted, pursuing divine incommensurable utility their way – a kind of Protestant polytheism.

Rorty develops the polytheist credo in three propositions: